

# NEWPORT STATE PARK

*Proposed variance to the [Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Region Master Plan](#) to expand authorized equestrian use in Newport State Park*

## Summary of public input

As part of the process to potentially expand currently authorized equestrian use at Newport State Park, the Department of Natural Resources recently sought public input on a draft variance to the *Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Region Master Plan*. The public comment period ran from August 16 to September 16, 2023. This document provides a brief overview of the proposed variance, how public input was gathered, how staff analyzed the comments, and a summary of the messages heard. This document concludes with a short description of next steps.

## BACKGROUND

### Summary of the proposed variance

Newport State Park (NSP) is included in the [Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan](#) (Plan), which was approved by the Natural Resources Board in 2018.

The 2018 Plan authorized 4 to 6 miles of new equestrian trails in the following portions of the park:

- Management Area 1 (Recreation Management Area – Type 4; 37 acres)
- Northern portion of Management Area 2 (Recreation Management Area – Type 3; in total this management area encompasses 690 acres).

These trails would be loop trails contained wholly in the property. The Plan also authorized an expansion of an existing parking area (Lot #4) to accommodate up to six vehicle/horse trailers, added toilet facilities, 4 to 6 hitching posts and a mowed grass area. Construction of equestrian trails and associated facilities has not begun.

After additional analysis, the department concluded that the area initially envisioned for equestrian trails would not provide high quality experiences, in either location or distance. The location identified in the Plan for equestrian trails (the northern portion of Management Area 2) has areas where the limestone-based bedrock is at or near the surface and has features such as cracks, crevices and other irregularities. This karst topography can be a hazard for horses and riders.

Also, a private inholding restricts access from the parking area #4 to the rest of Management Area 2 (see [Map K-4 of the Plan](#)).

The proposed variance would make four changes to the equestrian use authorized for Newport State Park in the *Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Master Plan*:

1. Increase the mileage of authorized equestrian trails from “4 to 6 miles” to “up to 10 miles.”
2. Allow equestrian trails to be sited throughout Management Area 2, not just the northern portion of this area. This would enable trails to be located away from the areas with karst topography.

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3. Allow equestrian use to be co-located on hiking and hiking/biking trails in Management Areas 1 and 2 where it will improve the efficiency of the trail network and will not substantially detract from existing uses. The department expects this will occur in short stretches where options to construct equestrian trails are not feasible or practical. In total, the department expects co-locating equestrians with hikers and bikers to occur on less than 0.5 miles, out of the total of seven miles of hiking and hiking/biking trails in Areas 1 and 2. Places where equestrian use is co-located with existing hiking or hiking/biking trails will meet department guidelines and policies.
4. Allow the construction of a new parking area in a former gravel pit on Newport Lane. This site would better align with the location of the proposed equestrian trails and would include the same facilities noted in the 2018 Plan: parking space to accommodate up to six vehicle-horse trailers, toilet facilities, 4 to 6 hitching posts, and a mowed grassy.

### **Language from the Proposed Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Region Master Plan**

The *Proposed Master Plan* is the version presented to the Natural Resources Board for their consideration and approval. This version differs from the *Final Master Plan*, which is what's posted on the department's "Completed Plans" web page. The *Final Master Plan* is a revised and pared down version of the *Proposed Master Plan*. The *Final Master Plan* converts wording from "proposed" to "planned" or "authorized" and takes out portions that are not germane to the actual management of the property (i.e., the environmental analysis, description of alternatives, and explanation of the public involvement process and input received).

The environmental analysis portion of the *Proposed Master Plan* includes language concerning how the department will analyze development projects in the future where specific locations, scope or scale were not known at the time the *Proposed Master Plan* was written. Page 129 of the *Proposed Master Plan* states:

#### "RECREATION ACTIVITIES WHERE PARTICIPATION HAS THE POTENTIAL FOR SUBSTANTIAL ADVERSE SOCIAL OR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS"

People's participation in the activities listed here has the potential to cause negative social or environmental impacts or be controversial depending on site-specific circumstances. To be clear, participation in these activities has the potential for adverse impacts; through appropriate design and management of trails and other facilities, signage and education, in many cases adverse outcomes can be minimized to the extent that any impacts are minor, temporary or localized.

- ATV/UTV riding
- Off-highway motorcycle riding
- Four-wheel drive vehicle driving
- Snowmobiling
- Horseback riding
- Dog training and trialing
- Target shooting – firearms

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An impact assessment will be conducted for major new facilities that have been generally authorized in the master plan but have not been sited and designed. The impact assessment (and public input opportunity) will be completed at the design and construction approval stages.”

Thus, if the department seeks to construct horseback riding trails at Newport State Park it will evaluate potential impacts that may result based on the actual proposed locations. The analysis of impacts will consider a range of issues including locations of rare plant and animals, important geologic, ecological, and cultural resources and features, existing recreational uses, and other factors. The public will have the opportunity to comment on the analysis.

### **PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS**

#### **Methods of gathering public input**

The public comment period ran from August 16 to September 16, 2023. The public was encouraged to mail, email, or call the department with their comments. The following input was received:

- Emails – 93 emails received
- Letters – 3 letters received
- Phone call – 1 phone call was received, which was transcribed

#### **The department’s approach to analyzing the comments received**

The department is thankful for all the input received and the time and effort that people took to reflect on the proposed variance and provide their perspectives.

Although the department sought and received comments on the issue of potentially expanding the miles of authorized equestrian trails, comments supporting a particular point of view were not counted as votes with the most votes “winning.” Rather, our approach to analyzing the input received is to carefully read through all the comments and material presented to find common themes and issues. Our goal is to identify the range of reactions to the proposed variance and the reasoning behind those stances.

Rather than attempt to describe all the ideas and perspectives heard, this document focuses on summarizing those issues and perspectives that were most commonly raised.

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## MESSAGES HEARD

### Appropriateness of equestrian trails at a Wilderness Park

It was noted that equestrian use in the park (and increasing the miles of allowable equestrian trails) is incongruent with the park's designation as a wilderness park. It was stated that NSP is the only designated wilderness park in Wisconsin with the intent to be a quiet, uncrowded alternative to other areas of Door County; it was noted that adding equestrian use was not aligned with that purpose. It was stated that the park is the only Dark Sky property in Wisconsin, although there was no indication that respondents believed horseback riding in the park would detract from the night sky.

### Impacts from equestrian uses to the environment and visitors

Comments related to impacts from horses included:

- Safety of interactions between horseback riders and hikers/bicyclists on shared trails. It was mentioned that some people do not feel safe near horses and that fast-moving bikes and horses were not compatible.
- Spread of invasive species by horses. Concern was raised that considerable effort is invested by the Newport Wilderness Society (the park's Friends Group) in addressing invasive plant species now and that horseback riding will exacerbate the problem. Others stated that horses have minimal effects on vegetation along trails, including that they are not a major source of invasive plants compared to other vectors.
- Erosion and compaction impacts to trails by 1000+ pound animals. Concerns were raised that horses on existing hiking and biking trails would substantially impact the trails through widening, compaction, and erosion. Others stated that horses are not a major contributor of trail degradation.
- Horse manure and its clean-up and disposal. It was mentioned that, if equestrian trails were constructed, riders would need to clean up after their horses. To some people, this seemed unlikely to happen and that the manure would negatively affect hikers' and bicyclists' experiences.
- Browsing of native vegetation and the need to cut trees and brush to construct equestrian trails. Concern was expressed that many trees would need to be removed to construct the trails and that horses would eat vegetation along the trails. Horseback riders stated that horses typically don't eat while they are on trail rides.
- The increasingly crowded conditions at the park. It was noted that since the pandemic, visitation levels at NSP have risen substantially and that adding horseback riding would exacerbate this problem.

### Adequacy of the impact analysis

Concern was expressed that the department had not adequately identified where the equestrian trails would be located and had not adequately analyzed the potential impacts of equestrian trails on the

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natural resources and existing public uses of the park. It was suggested that the department should evaluate potential impacts of equestrian trails and their use on:

- Rare plants, wildlife and high-quality native communities.
- Existing recreation uses and the quiet setting of the park.
- Existing hiking and biking trails.
- The type and amount of vegetation that would be cut for trails, parking area, and grassy area.
- Groundwater contamination from horse manure.

### **Funding and maintenance of trails**

It was stated that current staffing levels at the park staff are not adequate to manage the existing trail system and that the Newport Wilderness Society takes on much of the work to maintain trails, address invasive species and other management tasks. It was questioned who would be responsible for constructing and maintaining the trails and parking area, toilet facilities and grassy area.

It was noted by equestrians that they were willing and able to volunteer to help construct and maintain a trail system at NSP. Commentors stated that equestrian clubs have a positive history of volunteering for trail management in other parts of the state.

### **Need for equestrian trails in the region and Door County**

Horseback riders noted that there are very limited opportunities to ride horses on public lands in Door County and that it is dangerous for equestrians to ride on roads and road shoulders (which happens now due to a lack of better options). Also, it was stated that people like to ride their horses in scenic areas and that everyone should have access to Newport State Park to enjoy the setting.

The historic horseback riding in the county and the Newport area was mentioned along with a desire to bring the use back.

Conversely, it was noted that there didn't appear to be many horses in the county and it was suggested that equestrian trails at the far northern end of the county would likely not be used much. A horse owner noted that, in their opinion, the park would be used by only a modest number of local residents. To some, it appeared that the construction of equestrian trails would result in substantial environmental impacts but only benefit a few riders.

Concern was raised that if trails were constructed it was possible that a commercial stable would be established near or adjacent to the park and encourage patrons to ride in the park. It was noted that this would result in high numbers of riders and substantial impacts.

Some comments seem to reference existing equestrian trails on private lands in the county, similar to the network of snowmobile trails ("Every year, we lose properties that we were once allowed to ride on. Farms get broken up, lots get sold, people move in and decide they don't want horses (or snowmobile trails) crossing their land.") It is unclear the nature of this opportunity or to what degree these trails meet horseback riders' current needs.

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## **Benefits to the local community**

It was noted that trails at NSP would provide a valuable and safe experience for equestrians and would generate benefits (including economic benefits) to the local community and the state. It was stated that equestrians would be drawn to NSP for a riding experience in the park and thus increase use of the property. Conversely, it was stated that establishing equestrian trails in the park would lead many existing users to discontinue visiting.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The department will consider the public comments received as it evaluates the appropriateness of pursuing the proposed variance. Two outcomes are possible in the next step:

1. The department decides not to pursue the proposed variance. It will post this decision on the department website and describe the rationale.
2. The department decides to continue the process to develop equestrian trails in the park. It will develop an analysis of anticipated impacts, as described in the *Proposed Master Plan*. The assessment will evaluate potential impacts that may result based on the actual locations of proposed trail and associated facilities. The analysis of impacts will consider a range of issues including locations of rare plants and animals, important geologic, ecological, and cultural resources and features, existing recreational uses, and other factors. The public will have the opportunity to review and comment on the impact analysis. Following the impact analysis and public comment period, the department will decide whether to move forward with the proposed variance.